

The Christian conception of hope entails not merely the salvation of individual souls, but the comprehensive reconciliation of all creation to the fullness of divine love. Achieving perfect fellowship with God necessitates reconciliation with our non-human kin—nature itself. A proper theological analysis must therefore consider the telos of creation and humanity's role in realizing that divine end. This analysis requires a reorientation of anthropocentric paradigms, particularly in how humanity understands its relationship to the natural world.

Daniel Migliore frames Christian hope in eschatological terms, defining it as "reflection on the Christian hope for the completion of human life in perfect fellowship with God and others and for the consummation of God's purposes for all creation."^[1] Such hope transcends individual salvation; it encompasses the cosmic renewal of all that God has made. The traditional theological emphasis on personal redemption risks obscuring the broader scriptural vision of an eschatological restoration of the entire created order.

The Hebrew Scriptures present two distinct creation narratives that, when read together, emphasize the interconnectedness of humanity and nature. Genesis 1 portrays an orderly progression of creation, culminating in the creation of humankind:

"Then God said, 'Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'" (Gen. 1:26 NRSV)

Conversely, Genesis 2 presents a more intimate narrative in which the human is created first, followed by nature to support human life:

"...then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." (Gen. 2:7 NRSV)

Both accounts emphasize a fundamental interconnectedness: humankind and non-human creation share a common origin in God. Humanity is granted roles of "dominion" and of "tilling and keeping" the land—roles that imply responsibility, not exploitation.

Elizabeth Johnson contrasts two interpretative paradigms: the dominion model, in which humans stand atop a hierarchical structure of creation, and the community of creation model, which posits that all creatures are part of an interdependent web of life sustained by God.[2] She argues persuasively that the Genesis mandate to exercise "dominion" does not authorize domination or destruction. God declares all creation good and entrusts Noah, for instance, with the preservation of animal life, not its subjugation (Gen. 6:19; 7:22). These living beings possess the "breath of life" from God, underscoring their inherent value.[3]

Unfortunately, dominion has been historically misinterpreted to justify ecological exploitation. The institutional Church has often remained silent or ambiguous in its advocacy for non-human life. Johnson highlights the theological imperative for stewardship, asserting that "the Earth and all of its resources belong ultimately to God." [4]

Jurgen Moltmann similarly emphasizes humanity's dependence on the broader ecosystem.

He writes, "The human being is the last being God creates and therefore the most dependent of all God's creations." [5] Without nature, humanity cannot survive. This theological anthropology is affirmed in God's rebuke of Job, wherein creation is depicted as existing independently of human utility (Job 38). As Johnson notes, "the human role in the life of other species is next to nothing." [6]

In this light, the community of creation is not merely a theological abstraction but a lived reality. Humans rely on trees for oxygen; trees do not rely on humans. Recognizing this interdependence demands repentance from anthropocentrism and an active reorientation toward ecological justice. Johnson concludes, "Broadening the terms of our own identity in light of the reality of others, we end up seeing, thinking, and acting differently." [7]

Christian hope, as envisioned by Migliore, encompasses not only a personal future but a cosmic renewal: "The fulfillment for which we yearn cannot be found apart from the renewal and transformation of the heaven and the earth to which we are bound in life and in death." [8] Scripture affirms this cosmic trajectory (cf. Isa. 35:1-2, 5-7; Rev. 22:20; Rom. 8:22).

Moltmann insists on the necessity of a new understanding of God, nature, and humanity: "We need a new understanding of nature and a new picture of the human being – and that means a new experience of God." [9] He envisions all things as being from, through, and in God—not only humanity. Thus, eschatological reconciliation must be inclusive of all life.

"The essential thing at present," he writes, "is to perceive in all things... the driving forces of God's Spirit." [10]

This inclusive eschatology poses a challenge to those who narrowly define salvation. While God may still extend grace to those focused on individual redemption, Migliore cautions that Christian hope envisions a communal consummation: "Hope in the consummation of life in the joyful communion of the triune God." [11] Without a vision of cosmic renewal, theology risks collapsing into individualism.

Empirical evidence of ecological degradation further compels this theological shift.

Climate change, species extinction, and resource inequity highlight the consequences of human dominion unmoored from stewardship. Moltmann warns, "Those who begin to love life... will resist the killing of human beings and the exploitation of the earth." [12]

My theological formation—shaped by Southern Baptist family influences, a United Church of Christ congregation, and Catholic education—did not emphasize nature as a subject of theological concern. Moltmann's statement, "The earth can live without us human beings, but we cannot live without the earth," [13] was revelatory. It reframes theology not around human centrality, but divine interdependence.

Migliore, Johnson, and Moltmann collectively affirm that eschatology includes not only the redemption of humanity but the restoration of creation. This expanded vision calls theologians and faith communities to active engagement in ecological justice.

Contemporary faith-based initiatives provide practical models of this theological hope.

According to a 2023 World Resources Institute report, faith organizations manage vast land holdings and financial assets, positioning them to be leaders in ecological restoration.[14]

The Faith Ecology Network offers strategies for biodiversity care, including liturgical engagement and ecological education.[15] The Compassion Consortium similarly affirms that humans do not own the earth, but must protect and care for it.[16]

In sum, Christian hope must encompass the groaning of creation (Rom. 8:22). Only through a reconciled relationship with nature can humanity fulfill its eschatological vocation. The triune God breathes the same life into all creation. This divine breath is both origin and destiny, calling humanity into a renewed community of creation.

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